DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 442 884 UD 033 614

AUTHOR	Moore, Kristin Anderson; Vandivere, Sharon; Ehrle, Jennifer
TITLE	Turbulence and Child Well-Being. New Federalism: National Survey of America's Families. Series B, No. B-16. Assessing the New Federalism: An Urban Institute Program To Assess Changing Social Policies.
INSTITUTION	Urban Inst., Washington, DC.; Child Trends, Inc., Washington, DC.
SPONS AGENCY	Annie E. Casey Foundation, Baltimore, MD.; Kellogg Foundation, Battle Creek, MI.; Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, Princeton, NJ.; Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, Menlo Park, CA.; Ford Foundation, New York, NY.; John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, Chicago, IL.; Mott (C.S.) Foundation, Flint, MI.; David and Lucile Packard Foundation, Los Altos, CA.; McKnight Foundation, Minneapolis, MN.; Commonwealth Fund, New York, NY.; Weingart Foundation, Los Angeles, CA.; Fund for New Jersey, East Orange.; Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation, Milwaukee, WI.; Joyce Foundation, Chicago, IL.; Rockefeller Foundation, New York, NY.
PUB DATE	2000-06-00
NOTE	9p.; Additional support provided by the Stuart Fundation.
AVAILABLE FROM	Urban Institute, 2100 M Street, N.W., Washington, DC 20037. Tel: 202-261-5687; Web site: http://www.urban.org.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Evaluative (142)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Behavior Problems; *Change; *Child Welfare; *Children; *Family Environment; Health; Low Income Groups; National Surveys; *Poverty; *Stress Variables
IDENTIFIERS	Access to Health Care

ABSTRACT

The 1997 National Survey of America's Families (NSAF) asked parents of 6- to 17-year-olds several questions in order to assess the degree of turbulence or stability in a child's life. Turbulence was associated with several types of change, including moves and multiple school changes. The NSAF is a survey of more than 44,000 families, representing a national sample and the populations of 13 states, conducted as part of the Assessing the New Federalism project. A child who experienced two or more of the defined changes during the prior 12 months was classified as experiencing turbulence. Nationwide in 1997, 6% of all children experienced turbulence as defined for this study. When children are compared by family income, welfare receipt, family structure, and parental education, it becomes apparent that turbulence is much more prevalent in poor families than it is in moderate- or higher-income families. Fourteen percent of children in families that received Aid to Families with Dependent Children experienced high levels of turbulence in their lives. Nine percent of children who lived in one-parent families experienced turbulence, compared with 5% of children in two-parent families. Children who had experienced turbulence were also more likely than other children to have high levels of emotional and behavioral problems. There is considerable variation across states in the percentages of children who have experienced high levels of turbulence, with a high of 9% in Florida. Evidence from the NSAF indicates that turbulence is associated with poorer

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outcomes for children. (Contains 1 table, 5 figures, and 22 references.) (SLD)

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Kristin Anderson Moore and Sharon Vandivere, Child Trends, and
Jennifer Ehrle, The Urban Institute

New Federalism: National Survey of American Families
Series B, B-16, June 2000

The Urban Institute

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Child TRENDS

TURBULENCE AND CHILD WELL-BEING

Kristin Anderson Moore and Sharon Vandivere, Child Trends
and Jennifer Ehrle, The Urban Institute

Researchers studying a variety of topics have come to similar conclusions about the unsettling effect of change on children. Children who move from school to school are less academically successful than are children who do not change schools (Prebish and Downy 1999). Social and cognitive development are lower among children experiencing repeated changes in their child care compared with children who have a stable provider (Hayes, Palmer, and Zaslow 1990; Howes 1998; Howes and Hamilton 1993; Howes and Stewart 1987; Whitebrook, Howes, and Phillips 1990). Similarly, changes in household structure and family composition are associated with increased problems for children (Aquilino 1996; Cherlin 1999; Moore, Morrison, and Glei 1995; Thornberry et al. 1999; Wu and Martinson 1993), and children whose families frequently change their residence also face greater developmental challenges (Hagan, MacMillan, and Wheaton 1996; Haveman, Wolf, and Spaulding 1991; Ingersoll, Scamman, and Eckerling 1989; Pribesh and Downy 1999; Simmons et al. 1987; Wood et al. 1993). The construct of turbulence recognizes the importance of these reinforcing findings—disparate forms of change may be harmful or risky for children. Furthermore, multiple changes that create instability in several areas of a child's life in a short period of time may be especially damaging (Simmons et al. 1987).

The 1997 National Survey of America's Families (NSAF) asked parents[1] of 6- to 17-year-olds several questions in order to assess the degree of turbulence or stability in a child's life.[2] Possible signs of turbulence included:

- Moving from one state to another,
- Moving to a different home,
- Moving in with another family,
- Two or more changes in employment by either a parent or a parent's spouse,
- Two or more school changes, and
- A significant decline in the health of the child, parent, or parent's spouse.

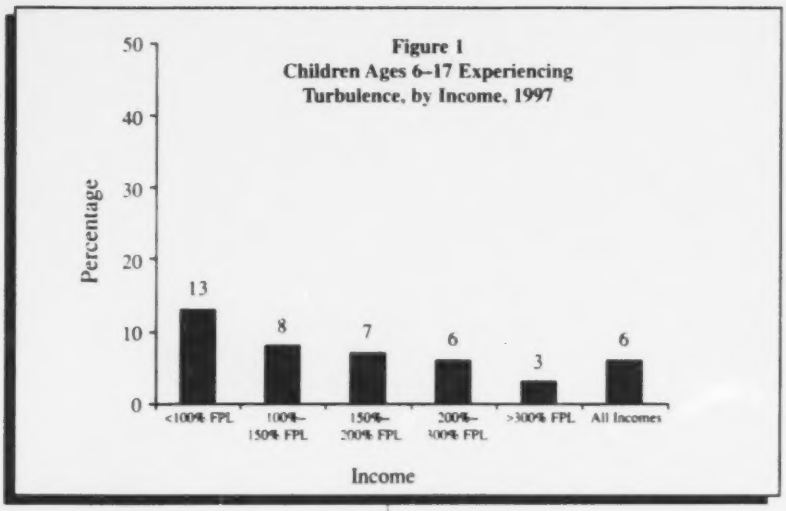
A child who experienced two or more of these changes during the 12 months previous to the survey was classified as experiencing turbulence.

Instability in childhood—moving, changing schools, changes in a family member's employment or health—is associated with increased emotional and behavioral problems.

If turbulence is short lived and results in higher family income, a better school and neighborhood, or a more stable family life, it may not undermine a child's long-term well-being. On the other hand, if turbulence is great or persists for a long period of time, it may pose short- and long-term risks to a child. According to a variety of indicators, levels of turbulence are higher in disadvantaged families than in the general population.

Social and Demographic Differences in Turbulence

Nationwide in 1997, 6 percent[3] of all children experienced turbulence as defined here. But tremendous differences in the percentage of children who have experienced turbulence are obvious when they are compared by family income, welfare receipt, family structure, and parental education.



Differences by Family Income

Turbulence is much more prevalent in poor families than it is in moderate- or higher-income families (figure 1). The percentage of children experiencing turbulence was increasingly lower among children living in families with increasingly higher incomes. For example, 13 percent of children in families with incomes below the federal poverty level (FPL) experienced turbulence, 7 percent of those with incomes between 150 and 200 percent of the FPL experienced turbulence, and 3 percent of those with incomes over three times the FPL experienced turbulence.

Differences by Welfare Receipt

Fourteen percent of children in families that received Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) at some time in 1996 experienced high levels of turbulence in their lives, compared with 6 percent of children whose families did not receive AFDC. Similarly, 14 percent of children in families that received food stamps in 1996 experienced turbulence, compared with 5 percent of children whose families did not receive food stamps.

Differences by Family Structure

Nine percent of children who lived with an unmarried parent experienced turbulence, compared with 5 percent of children living with two married parents.

Differences by Parental Education

Ten percent of children whose parents did not complete high school had lives defined as turbulent, compared with 4 percent of children living with at least one parent who had a bachelor's degree or higher.

Turbulence and Child Well-Being

The NSAF includes several measures of child well-being that can be linked with turbulence. Findings consistently indicate worse outcomes for children who have experienced turbulence.

School Engagement

Among school-age children, those who had experienced turbulence were less engaged in school than those who had not.[4] This difference becomes more pronounced as children get older:

- *Children ages 6 to 11:* Twenty-two percent of children in this age group who had experienced turbulence had low levels of school engagement, compared with 15 percent of children who had not experienced turbulence.
- *Youth ages 12 to 17:* Forty percent of children in this age group who experienced turbulence had low levels of school engagement, compared with 25 percent of other children (figure 2).

Emotional and Behavioral Problems

Children who had experienced turbulence were also more likely than other children to have high levels of emotional and behavioral problems.[5]

- Among 6- to 11-year-olds who had experienced turbulence, 10 percent showed high levels of behavioral and emotional problems, compared with 6 percent of other children.
- Behavioral and emotional problems were more common among older children. Among 12- to 17-year-olds who had experienced turbulence, 25 percent exhibited high levels of problems, compared with 8 percent of other youth (figure 3).
- Youth ages 12 to 17 who experienced turbulence were more likely to

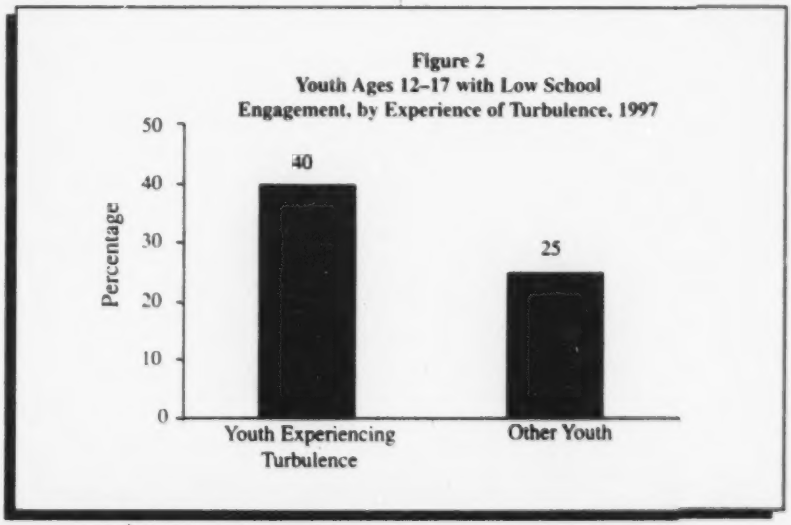
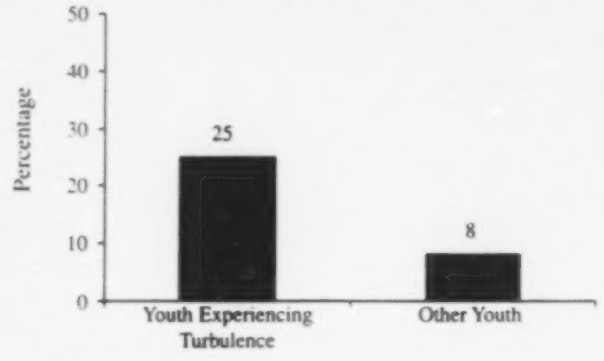


Figure 3
High Behavioral and Emotional Problems among Youth Ages 12–17, by Experience of Turbulence, 1997



have skipped school or been suspended or expelled than other youth. Thirty-one percent of youth who had experienced turbulence had been suspended or expelled, compared with 13 percent of other youth. Seventeen percent of youth who had experienced turbulence had skipped school two or more times in the year preceding the survey, compared with 10 percent of other youth (figure 4).

Differences across States

In addition to national statistics, the NSAF provides detailed data on 13 states. There was considerable variation across states in the percentages of children who had experienced high levels of turbulence (figure 5). For example:

- Nine percent of children in Florida were experiencing turbulence, a percentage significantly[6] above the national average of 6 percent.
- Six states had percentages of children experiencing turbulence that were significantly below the national average: Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, New Jersey, New York, and Wisconsin.

In families with incomes below 200 percent of the FPL, state percentages of children experiencing turbulence ranged from 7 percent to 14 percent (table 1). None of the state percentages were significantly different from the national average of 10 percent for this income group.

In families with incomes above 200 percent of the FPL, state percentages ranged from 2 percent to 9 percent. Florida's percentage was significantly above the national average of 4 percent for this income group. Four states—Massachusetts, New Jersey, New York, and Wisconsin—had percentages significantly below the national average.

Conclusions

Nationally, 6 percent of children experience turbulence, defined here as two or more of six possible changes in residence, school, parental employment, or health. This number more than doubles to 13 percent for children living in families with incomes less than 100 percent of the FPL. This percentage also increases substantially for children living with an unmarried parent, with parents who have not completed high school, and in families receiving AFDC or food stamps.

Welfare reform could affect children's experience of turbulence (Child Trends 1999; Moore 1998). Time limits on benefit receipt, family caps on benefit levels, and financial sanctions for failure to meet requirements could lead to fluctuations in family income for welfare recipients. Children in families with unstable incomes may be more likely than other children to move and to change schools frequently. Income instability might be worse than a stable but low income—irregular income has been associated with academic and behavior problems for children (Moore et al. 1994), as well as an increased likelihood for nonmarital births (Wu 1996). Alternatively, the ability to retain an increased portion of their earned wages without having cash welfare benefits reduced could improve families' financial situations.

The impact of welfare reform on the number of different jobs a parent consecutively holds is unclear. Welfare reform requires most parents to obtain employment. Some parents may be able to find steady employment, but other parents, particularly low-skilled parents who have difficulty finding good jobs, may have trouble finding and keeping jobs.

Figure 4
Youth Ages 12–17 Who Have Skipped School or Been Suspended/Expelled, by Levels of Turbulence, 1997

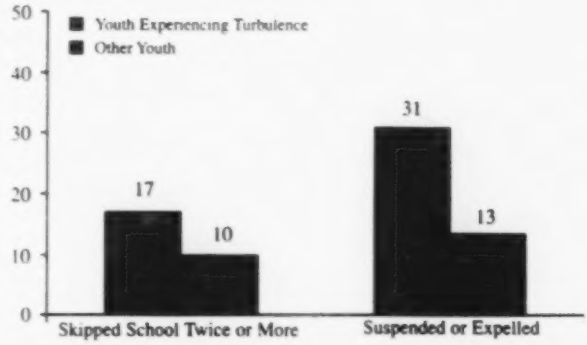
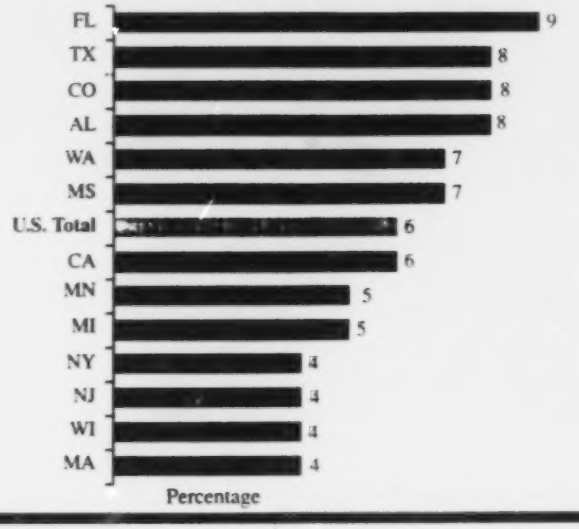


Figure 5
Children Ages 6–17 Experiencing Turbulence, by State, 1997



Parents who have a steady job may be better able to find stable, high-quality day care for their children than parents whose work schedules often change. Alternatively, parents who go through many job changes because they lose their jobs could become depressed; children who have depressed parents are more likely than other children to experience such negative outcomes as poor health (Downey and Coyne 1990).

Evidence from the NSAF indicates that turbulence is associated with poorer outcomes for children, specifically lower levels of school engagement and higher levels of behavioral and emotional problems, skipping school, and being suspended or expelled from school. Although the NSAF analyses cannot support causal conclusions, the patterns found here are both substantial in size and consistent in direction. Moreover, in view of a number of studies linking the components of turbulence with poorer child development, it seems reasonable to conclude that tracking levels of turbulence in families with children can provide early evidence regarding circumstances that may undermine children's development.

The data described in this paper provide baseline national- and state-level estimates of the percentages of children experiencing levels of turbulence that may inhibit their healthy development. Continued monitoring of fluctuations in these levels will inform policymakers and the public about how children are faring in an era of significant policy change.

Notes

1. In the NSAF, a parent is the individual who identifies himself or herself as the adult in the household most knowledgeable about the child. In 95 percent of cases, this adult is the child's biological, adoptive, step-, or foster parent; in 77 percent of cases, this adult is the child's biological, adoptive, step-, or foster mother.

2. Unfortunately, it was not possible to assess changes in child care or family structure in the NSAF. Accordingly, the incidence of turbulence in children's lives will be underestimated in these data.

3. Estimates have been rounded to the nearest tenth in the table and to the nearest whole number in the text and figures.

4. Jim Connell and Lisa Bridges at the Institute created the school engagement scale for Research and Reform in Education in California. Parents were asked about the extent to which their children did schoolwork only when forced to, did just enough schoolwork to get by, always did homework, and cared about doing well in school. The responses to these four questions were summed to generate a measure of school engagement. A score less than or equal to 10 on the 16-point scale was used to indicate low levels of engagement.

5. The behavioral and emotional problems scale in the NSAF is based on a set of questions developed for the National Health Interview Survey (NHIS). Parents of children ages 6 to 17 were asked to indicate whether the child does not get along with other kids, cannot concentrate or pay attention for long, and has been unhappy, sad, or depressed. Parents of 6- to 11-year-olds were also asked to indicate whether the child feels worthless or inferior; has been

Table 1
Percentage of Children Experiencing Turbulence, by State and Family Income, 1997

	AL	CA	CO	FL	MA	MI	MN	MS	NJ	NY	TX	WA	WI	U.S.
At or below 200% of FPL	12.3	8.1	13.6	9.3	7.3	7.9	8.2	8.0	8.1	7.6	12.4	11.5	7.9	10.0
Above 200% of FPL	4.0	5.1	5.0	**8.7**	**2.5**	3.3	3.4	4.9	**2.8**	**2.4**	4.1	5.3	**2.4**	4.1
All incomes	7.8	6.5	7.9	**9.0**	**4.0**	**4.8**	**4.8**	6.7	**4.3**	**4.6**	8.0	7.4	**4.1**	6.5

Note: Figures in **bold** represent statistically significant differences from the national average at the .05 confidence level.

nervous, high-strung, or tense; or acts too young for his or her age. Parents of 12- to 17-year- olds were asked whether the child has trouble sleeping, lies or cheats, or does poorly at schoolwork. Answers were summed for each age group to create a scale of emotional and behavioral problems. A score less than or equal to 12 on the 18-point scale was designated as indicating greater problems.

6. All tests for significance were conducted using two-tailed tests for statistically significant differences between percentages for different groups at the .05 level. For figure 1, the relationship between poverty and turbulence was tested using the Chi-square statistic.

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This series presents findings from the National Survey of America's Families (NSAF). First administered in 1997, the NSAF is a survey of 44,461 households with and without telephones that are representative of the nation as a whole and of 13 selected states (Alabama, California, Colorado, Florida, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, New Jersey, New York, Texas, Washington, and Wisconsin). As in all surveys, the data are subject to sampling variability and other sources of error. Additional information about the survey is available at the Urban Institute Web site: **http://www.urban.org**.

The NSAF is part of *Assessing the New Federalism*, a multiyear project to monitor and assess the devolution of social programs from the federal to the state and local levels. Alan Weil is the project director. The project analyzes changes in income support, social services, and health programs. In collaboration with Child Trends, the project studies child and family well-being.

The project has received funding from The Annie E. Casey Foundation, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, The Ford Foundation, The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, The David and Lucile Packard Foundation, The McKnight Foundation, The Commonwealth Fund, the Stuart Foundation, the Weingart Foundation, The Fund for New Jersey, The Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation, the Joyce Foundation, and The Rockefeller Foundation.

About the Authors

Kristin Anderson Moore is president and senior scholar at Child Trends.

Jennifer Ehrle is a research associate in the Urban Institute's Population Studies Center.

Sharon Vandivere is a research analyst at Child Trends.

Publisher: The Urban Institute, 2100 M Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20037

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